



Ormakau Maasai Cultural Village

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Nairobi

Just half an hour from the city centre on the plains of Kitengela is a world teeming with wild animals

It's like I've turned a page to the fabled Garden of Eden. To come across a herd of about 20 giraffes with their calves browsing on tall acacia trees by the riverine forest with the morning skies hung heavy with clouds from the previous day's rain. An aeroplane flies over interrupting the tinkle of the cow bells and the silence of the plains.

It's really awesome for we are not in a national park or a zoo but on the open plains of Kitengela. And the shift in worlds is even more dramatic - it takes half an hour to drive from Nairobi's industrial area roundabout, past Athi and Kitengela towns and then to these plains that are the dispersal area for the animals that move in and out of Nairobi National Park. But then Nairobi is part of the ancient Maasai land and because of their tolerance towards wildlife, we house the only national park next to a city anywhere in the world, where the wildlife freely migrate in and out of the park, following the rains and the grass route.

Nickson Parmisa is a young Maasai, recently graduated from the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya Centre for Tourism and Research. The invitation to visit the cultural boma which borders the Hippo Pools in Nairobi National Park had been long standing. We meet him in the busy town of Kitengela.

"You will see more animals as we drive along," he says as we watch the herd of giraffes suddenly take off on a gallop. True to word, the Maasai plains are decked with zebras, wildebeest, Thomson's gazelles, Grant's gazelles, a Jackson's hartebeest, ostriches and birds of many feathers. The skyline is broken by the occasional Maasai homestead and then we see the red ochre 'enkaji' in the kraal or 'enkang' fenced in a circular thicket. It's the Ormakau Maasai Cultural village separated from Nairobi National Park by the gorge and the Athi River. "We call it Ormakau because Ormakau is hippo in the Maa language and we are on the other side of the Hippo Pools in the park," explains Parmisa.

The women are busy in the boma. They have built the cluster of 'enkaji(s)' and after greetings have been exchanged, we stroll to one.

Inside the cool, dim interior, lit only by the two tiny holes for windows, Rachel Kool, a member of Empakasi Group Ranch points to the features inside. "This is the man's room and this, the woman's." The rooms in question are two partitions with low beds made of sticks and covered with cow hide. A place in the middle between the two sleeping quarters is the fireplace. There's a side room for the calves.

The villagers formed the ecotourism project to empower themselves with a project that works for the benefit of all, making the group independent in the long term. "We talked to Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to allow the visitors at the Nairobi National Park to cross the river and walk up to the village. We are only 500 metres from the river."

We walk down the nature trail which will leads to the river.

"Our men made the path," Ann Lelia says proudly. She is the treasurer of the group. Amidst the huge boulders masked with lichen, we stop to watch a herd of impalas browsing not far from us and then pass by the sacred fig tree which is still used for prayers and sacrifice to the gods while Parmisa points out the traditional plants still used for cooking and treating ailments. It's a refreshing walk downhill to the river.

An enormous fig tree in the park spreads its shade, its ripe fruits falling into the river. There's a hippo path on the opposite bank.

Empakasi Group Ranch is 6000 acres. Being cattle people, the land is left open for the cattle and only the immediate homesteads are fenced to keep the wildlife at bay. Conflict with wildlife is nothing new here. Coming up with solutions is a way forward and communication and transparency is important.

"In 2000 the Friends of Nairobi National Park (FONNAP) came up with a land leasing scheme under which we were paid for each acre thrice a year. The condition is that the land is left unfenced, the animals are allowed to move freely and we do not sell the land. This scheme is supported by the Wildlife Foundation, an international organisation."

The Kitengela plains are important for the free dispersal of wildlife in and out of Nairobi National Park. That is what makes it unique in the world.

"In 2001, I worked with the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) where we took GPS points of all the fences on the Kitengela plains. It shows that the plains are not fenced, except for the areas near the towns."

At this point, we are met by the officials of the Kitengela Initiative Task Force who are touring the area. The officials are drawn from KWS, ILRI, African Conservation Centre, The Wildlife Foundation, National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) and from the community. "Our objective," explains an official from ACC, "is to identify the land under community ownership. This will help to establish the conservation area run by communities."

It's a way forward where local communities are coming up with innovative ideas to earn income from the wildlife instead of having to kill it in revenge.

Fact File

You can either camp or stay in the 'enkaji'. Take your drinking water and everything else. School groups are encouraged. Parmisa will take you on guided walks and give talks. It's a great way of learning on the field.

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